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Recommended Citation

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A Tale of Two Organs: Henry Erben And Apalachicola, Florida

Apalachicola, Florida Historical Society
March 9, 2000

Good evening and thank you for inviting me to join you on occasion. It is indeed a pleasure to be here. My name is Robert Delvin. I am Associate Professor and Fine Arts Librarian at Illinois Wesleyan University in Bloomington, Illinois. I am also an organist and a member of the Organ Historical Society, an organization that promotes a widespread musical and historical interest in American pipe organ building, through preservation, research and publication of historical information, and through recordings and public concerts.

I am here to speak to you this evening about the Henry Erben organ here at Trinity Episcopal Church. I suspect that a number of you may already be familiar with this historic and lovely instrument, having heard it perhaps during worship services or in concert. The paper that I am about to read to you, is the product of research conducted during a recent sabbatical leave from Illinois Wesleyan. Another version of this presentation is to be published by the Organ Historical Society, in its journal *The Tracker*, later this calendar year, commemorating the bicentennial of Henry Erben's birth on March 10, 1800.

My connection with Apalachicola, comes through a long-standing friendship with Dr. R. Bedford Watkins, organist of Trinity Church. From 1956-1988, Dr. Watkins was Professor of Piano at Illinois Wesleyan University, and served on the faculty committee that hired me in 1980. As long as I have known Bedford, he has demonstrated a lively interest in historic keyboard music and instruments, through his teaching, and through many public performances, particularly on the harpsichord and the fortepiano. Since his retirement, Bedford and his wife Eugenia have been in the thick of musical life here in Apalachicola, directing both the music at Trinity Church and the Ilse Newell Concert Series.

I paid my first visit to Apalachicola during the spring of 1995. Already familiar with my interest in historic pipe organs, the Watkins' were quick to introduce me to the little organ in their newly adopted church. Well, I guess you might call it "love at first sight *and* sound".

I was somewhat familiar with Henry Erben's reputation as an organ builder, from my knowledge of the history of the American pipe organ, but I had never actually heard or played one of his instruments in person. I was intrigued how an instrument by this prominent New York builder ended up down here in a small Gulf Coast town. At the time, I knew nothing of Apalachicola's history or its importance as a coastal shipping port in the early nineteenth century. George Chapel, however, was very happy to provide me with ample historical material to fill this lamentable gap in my education. In addition to George's own, fine essay on the history of Trinity Church¹, I am greatly indebted to William W. Rogers two volumes on Apalachicola, *Outposts on the Gulf*², and *At the water's edge*³, as well as Harry P. Owens, 1966 doctoral dissertation, *Appalachicola before 1861*⁴. Wiley L. Housewright's, *A History of Music and Dance in Florida: 1565—1865*⁵, contains numerous references to early musical life in Apalachicola. There is no shortage of scholarly publication on the life and career of Henry Erben, including many articles, and a substantial monograph by John Ogasapian⁶ of the University of Massachusetts at Lowell. I also made extensive use of Diocesan journals of the Episcopal Church in Florida at the State Archives in Tallahassee.

Henry Eben

Long regarded as one of the most important figures in the history of American pipe organ building, Henry Erben was certainly also one of the most colorful. During his long career, spanning nearly six decades, Erben's reputation for unwavering excellence as an organ builder, his forays into Tammany Hall politics, as well as his intransigent personality, far out-distanced the boundaries of his native New York City, where he spent his entire life. **[Slide 1]**

Henry was born on March 10, 1800 to Peter and Elizabeth Kern Erben, the daughter of a Reformed pastor from Heidleberg, Germany. Peter was a church musician, serving as organist in several New York City churches, and ending his career at the prestigious Trinity Episcopal Church, Wall Street, where in 1846, his son Henry was to install perhaps his most famous instrument. Later in life, Henry recalled that the organ was an every day part of his rearing and "a sweet memory of childhood..."

An interesting anecdote describes Henry's formal introduction to organ building. During December 1813, John Lowe, an English organ builder working in Philadelphia, completed a large organ for St. John's Episcopal Chapel in New York, where Peter Erben was organist. Knowing that the British had a blockade in New York Harbor, Lowe agreed to have the organ shipped to New York, but only after the captain of the sloop "Ann-Marie" assured him that he could successfully race and penetrate the blockade. Plans went awry however. The sloop was sighted by the British, seventy-four gun, "H.M.S. Plantagenet". A chase ensued, and before the Ann-Marie could reach the safety of port, she was captured by the Plantagenet.

At first, the British captain refused to release the organ, and according to one newspaper account, plans were to send it to Halifax, Nova Scotia, where it would be erected in a new Anglican church there. Following lengthy negotiations however, the British captain agreed to release the organ for a ransom of 2,000 Spanish dollars. Thomas S. Hall, an apprentice of Lowe later recalled carrying the currency across the docks under a flag of truce.

Meanwhile, John Lowe rushed to New York by stagecoach, but the December journey was damp and cold; he contracted pneumonia en route and died in New York on December 13, four days after arriving. Hall, Peter Erben and Peter's 13-year-old son Henry, erected the organ in the church, where it was first used on Easter Sunday, 1814. Following the completion of the instrument, Hall returned to Philadelphia where he took over Lowe's business.

Henry Erben became Thomas Hall's apprentice in 1816. For the next seven years, he assisted Hall with several prominent installations, including large instruments in New York, Baltimore and Charleston. Henry was frequently sent to the southern United States to set up organs built by the Lowe firm. Thus from an early date, Erben began to establish Southern connections which were to play an important role in his later career.

By the middle of 1823, we get our first glimpse of Erben as the direct and no-nonsense businessman, which later made him famous. Henry presumably needed cash to enter into partnership with Thomas Hall. Turning to his father, Peter Erben, he requested \$6,000. For some reason, Peter declined the request, so Henry—like any good nineteenth century businessman—took his father to court. Settled by the Supreme Court, State and County of New York, Peter was ordered to pay his son the \$6,000, plus court costs.

During the following June, 1824, a Charleston, South Carolina newspaper announced that

HALL & ERBEN, Church and Chamber Organ Builders, New York respectfully inform their Southern friends, that having considerably enlarged their establishment, they are prepared to execute orders for organs of every description upon shortest notice, and upon the most accommodating terms⁷.

It should probably come as little surprise, based on Henry's previous dealings with his own father, that the business marriage between Erben and Hall, was not one "made in heaven", for within three years, the partnership between the two was dissolved, with Erben becoming the sole owner of the establishment.

From 1827 until the beginning of the Civil War, the firm of "Henry Erben—Organ Manufacture" continued to expand, enlarge its work force and increase production. During the later 1820s, the firm produced an average of eight instruments annually, and the 1855 Industrial Census records that the firm manufactured 110 instruments in the twelve months preceding, July 19th. The census also indicated that Erben engaged 45 employees, used \$50,000 in

raw materials and the aggregate value of organs sold totaled just less than \$100,00.⁸ No other American organ builder matched this production for another twenty-five years.

Henry Erben was one of the most sought after organ builders of his generation. His work, numbering in excess of perhaps 1,000 instruments (his obituary cited 1,734 organs) was to be found throughout North and South America. The country's most prestigious churches, as well as most cathedrals built in the United States during the 1840s and 1850s, boasted large Erben organs. Yet Erben also had a significant market among rural congregations, providing small, one manual (i.e., keyboard) instruments built to same, exacting standards as his large organs. His business acumen made him a formidable competitor. He is believed to be the first American organ builder to aggressively use advertising literature to promote his work. During his career he is known to have published at least three opus lists, in 1843, 1874 and 1880. These lists were not arranged chronologically as a historical record of his work to date, but rather geographically by state, and then city or town. They were intended for the practical purpose of providing prospective clients with a reference tool for locating examples of Erben's work in a particular region, prior to ordering an instrument from him. Erben customers were almost always pleased with the product they received from his hand. If a customer decided to replace their existing organ with a new or larger instrument by Erben, Henry generally provided them with financial incentives, such as accepting the previous organ in trade, providing cash rebates, or both. Consequently, Erben succeeded to out-build, out-class and out-rate virtually all his competition in New York, Boston, Philadelphia and Baltimore for the greater part of the 19th century.

Revered by the musical elite of his generation, Erben was notorious for his coarse language, irritable disposition and violent temper. His irascible behavior towards clients and church authorities was especially apparent during negotiations with a buyer over the design and price of a new organ. More often than not, it was Erben who set the terms for a prospective contract, entertaining little or no debate.

Committees calling upon Mr. Erben stated their needs and financial limitations and he specified the organ. If a committee attempted to urge upon him plans inconsistent with his own, it was dismissed with denunciations emphasized by words from his private vocabulary, expressive if not elegant, his walking stick frequently assisting both emphasis and exit⁹.

The American Art Journal of 1881, portrayed Henry Erben as one of New York City's "most respected citizens", his business record being "both straightforward and honorable", and the prodigious level of his activity "remarkable". Yet, the article goes on to observe that

Among the builders of pipe organs, it is doubtful if any displayed more eccentricity, or was awarded a greater measure of tolerance than Henry Erben of New York. He had a decided genius for work, recognized no degrees of good or bad, and never sacrifice "his" ideals to the spirit of commercialism. This adherence to a fixed principle is reflected in every organ built by him...¹⁰

After the demise of the Hall & Erben firm in 1827, Erben continued to cultivate his southern market in earnest. By the mid-1840s nearly 20% of his work went to what would become the Confederacy and Border States. The Erben opus lists for the period 1833-1860 indicate sixteen organs going to the port city of Charleston alone, fourteen to New Orleans, as well as six each to Mobile and Montgomery. One of the best preserved of all of Henry Erben's instruments is the recently restored, 1845 organ located in the Huguenot Church in Charleston, S.C. **[Slide 2]** Erben also maintained a branch, service operation in Baltimore between 1847 and 1863, at which facility organ cases and mechanisms were manufactured. This facility also had a showroom for ready-made organs, "suitable for small churches, chapels and lecture rooms at prices from \$300 to \$1,000."¹¹

The post-Civil War economy greatly diminished Henry Erben's southern business, although he continued to build isolated instruments for southern congregations. As the economy improved, some of his southern clients returned. In 1875 for example, nine out

of a listed total production of twenty organs went to southern churches, four to Richmond alone. Even as the South began to attain a measure of economic recovery, the nation as a whole, was plunged into the depression brought about by the “panic” of 1873, with the expected adverse effect on the business of all organ builders, Erben included. From 1874-1879, Erben was forced once again to go into partnership, this time with William M. Wilson, under the name of Henry Erben & Co., and in 1880 until his death on May 7, 1884, he worked with his son, Charles. In 1881, Erben characteristically proclaimed:

I have now over 56 years of experience in manufacturing organs. In that time building the greater portion of the largest and most perfectly constructed organs in the United States, Canada, Mexico, and South America...I will unhesitatingly pronounce them not only equal, but superior, to those of any other manufacturer, whether American or European¹².

To our knowledge Henry never visited Europe, nor do we know on what “inferior” organs he based his comparisons. His skill as an organ builder was totally practical and empirical; learned through the time-honored method of apprenticeship, and no doubt infused with a substantial dose of 19th century, American-optimism and self-confidence. Sadly, of those 1000 plus instruments manufactured by the Erben firm, less than one tenth remain in anything like their original form. The exceptional quality of these speak for themselves.

Some of Henry Erben’s other activities included politics and banking. In 1836, he was elected Assistant Alderman of the Sixth (the Irish) Ward of New York City and was later involved in several Tammany Hall political controversies. His tempestuous and fiery personality frequently got him into trouble: on file at the Municipal Archives in New York City are papers for nearly 40 litigations. The most prominent was the case of “Henry Erben vs. the Mayor of New York” – which incidently, Erben won. His financial activities included service on the Board of Directors for the Seventh Ward Bank of New York in 1838.

Henry Erben constructed at least nine organs for churches in the Territory or State of Florida during the period 1836-1859, all for Episcopal congregations: one in Tallahassee, and two each in St. Augustine, Key West, Pensacola, and Apalachicola. The earliest to arrive were those for St. John's, Tallahassee and Trinity Church, St. Augustine, both in 1836. Of the two Apalachicola instruments, the first (according to Erben's opus lists) dated from 1840, while the current organ dates from 1859. Of the original nine, this last is the only remaining example; thus giving it the double distinction of being the only extant Erben in Florida, as well as the oldest pipe organ in the state.

Apalachicola: early and ante-bellum history

While at this point, I do not intend to present you with yet another history of Apalachicola, I do believe a short review of the settlement's founding and early days, will help set the context for what is to follow -- so I hope you will indulge me.

The word Apalachicola is found in several Native American languages. In the Choctaw tongue it means "allies" or "friendly people." In the Creek language it was used to describe a ridge of earth produced by sweeping the ground in preparation for a council or peace fire. The most reliable translation derives from the Hitchiti language spoken by the Apalachicola Indians of the northern Florida Territory, as "those people residing on the other side."¹³ Today residents of Apalachicola prefer to translate their city's name as "the land of friendly people", an appealing if not literal translation.¹⁴

Apalachicola is situated at the mouth of the Apalachicola River, where the river empties into a body of water known as East Bay. The fresh water flowing into East Bay creates a delta complex of swamps, bayous and winding streams. East Bay merges with the larger Apalachicola Bay, one to fourteen miles in width and thirty-six miles in length. These two bays comprising 204,320 acres¹⁵ are separated from the Gulf of Mexico by a narrow string of barrier islands, the most significant being St. George's Island with Dog Island to the east and St. Vincent Island to the west. Early white visitors and settlers were impressed by the region's two chief

characteristics: the abundance of marine life, especially oysters, and the shallow waters.¹⁶

The identity of the earliest Europeans to reach Apalachicola is unknown, although it is possible that survivors of the ill-fated, 1528 expedition of the Spaniard Panfilo de Narvaez may have reached one of the barrier islands guarding Apalachicola Bay. During the 17th and 18th centuries the Spanish, French, and English all competed for the rich Indian fur trade of the Florida Territory. International intrigue hindered attempts at permanent settlements along the Gulf coast. The French and Indian War, culminating in the Treaty of Paris in 1763, transferred ownership of Florida to the British, ending nearly 250 years of Spanish control. British rule lasted for only twenty years. The Union Jack was lowered at the close of the American Revolution. Because of its support of the American colonies during their War of Independence, Spain received Florida back for the short period of 1781-1819. The Territory was subsequently ceded again to the United States under the Adams-Onís Treaty, with actual transfer of control finally taking place in 1821. At the time of the transfer, Apalachicola and nearly 1.5 million acres of interior countryside was known as the Forbes Purchase, named after John Forbes of the Panton, Forbes and Leslie Trading Company who between 1804 - 1818 amassed this vast tract of land in payment for accumulated Indian debts.¹⁷

In 1821 Apalachicola was a low swampy area infested with insects and malaria. During hurricane season it was frequently buffeted by fierce storms off the Gulf of Mexico--an inhospitable place for human settlement. Yet within a few years a small community grew up at the mouth of the river to serve as the port of the newly created Apalachicola Customs District. Although originally known as Cottonton, the town was incorporated in 1829 as West Point because of its geographical situation along the western bank of the Apalachicola River. Residents soon petitioned the Legislative Council of the Territory of Florida¹⁸ however, to change the name of West Point to conform to the name of the river and bay. The name "Appalachicola" became official in 1831. While the official act inserted an extra "p" in the spelling, citizens preferred and continue

to use only the single letter. In the following year, Apalachicola was designated the seat of Franklin County. At this time the population of the town numbered roughly 200 people.

The population of Apalachicola in the early years varied greatly with the season. It peaked during the cotton shipping months of October-May and was smallest during the fever-ridden summer months. In 1833 postmaster William Price wrote, "... for 4-5 months during the year there prevailed a most malignant fever which carried away a large portion of the inhabitants, and all who were able abandoned the place during the sickly season."¹⁹ Still the town continued to grow and prosper. A special territorial census taken in 1838 numbered the population at 2,066, consisting of 1,890 whites, 169 slaves and 7 free Negroes.²⁰

The navigation system formed by the Apalachicola, Chattahoochee, and Flint rivers comprised six hundred miles of water transportation. Before the arrival of the railroads it provided the only commercially viable means of access to the interior of the Forbes Purchase, western Georgia and eastern Alabama. As early as 1822, 266 bales of cotton were loaded at Apalachicola for shipment to New York, the product of "the first seed ever planted in the neighborhood [which has] exceeded all expectations."²¹ In 1827 the first steamboat Fanny cleared Apalachicola Bay. Other steamboats soon followed. In 1842 alone, 287 vessels dropped anchor in coastal waters off the port.²² While cotton was the major product shipped down the Apalachicola River, other interior products were shipped as well, including lumber, staves, cedar, and live oak timbers. Exports during the first six months of 1832 included 16,000 bales of cotton, 491,000 feet of lumber and 40,000 slaves.²³ Subsequent years saw a steady increase in shipping activity. By 1837, the year in which Trinity Church was organized, the number of bales of cotton shipped out of Apalachicola had risen to 32,291. The year 1840 saw 72,232 bales leave the port, and a record, 153,392 bales were shipped in 1845.²⁴ On the eve of the Civil War Apalachicola was the third busiest port on the Gulf of Mexico, superseded only by New Orleans and Mobile.

The shallow, river and bay limited the draft of the vessels capable of negotiating the coastal waterways. Vessels drawing more

than twelve feet of water were forced to anchor in the Gulf beyond St. George Island, three to ten miles from the city wharves. These ships were serviced by lighter craft, primarily steamboats. Schooners were the favored vessel of the coastal trade and constituted the bulk of Apalachicola shipping. Schooners from New York would arrive in Apalachicola where they would be loaded with cotton and depart for Liverpool, England or other European ports. After unloading, the ship would return to New York with passengers and foreign goods. Ships might also return directly to Apalachicola loaded with salt in ballast or manufactured goods. An active trade also transpired between Apalachicola, New Orleans and Havana. Local merchants frequently sailed to New York or New Orleans to select goods for their stores. The list of fine merchandise advertised by Apalachicola merchants was both extensive and varied, including many types of foodstuffs, wine and spirits, fabric and clothing, hardware and household goods. Among the latter were cutlery, clocks, table silver, fine china, stemware, carpets, furniture, mattresses, and musical instruments: violins, flutes, tuning forks and pianoforte keys.²⁵ In spite of the rigors of frontier life, disease, and a frequently inhospitable climate, Apalachicolans made every attempt to provide themselves with the comforts of urban life and culture. Their strategic location made this possible.

Trinity Church

During those early frontier days of Apalachicola, residents developed a lifestyle that was considered open and friendly by some, wild and wicked by others. In 1837 a group of “concerned citizenry” petitioned Congress for judicial aid arguing that

like other seaport towns in new countries, our population is transient. We are visited by a number of strangers and adventurers from all quarters. Our streets are sometimes filled with seamen and boatmen, who soon discover that offenders cannot be brought to justice here, and avail themselves of such opportunities to indulge their vicious propensities²⁶.

In addition to enforcing civil behavior many residents desired the moralizing influence of organized religion. As early as 1835, the Rev. Fitch

W. Taylor of the Diocese of Maryland conducted Protestant Episcopal Church services in Apalachicola and in the neighboring port of St. Joseph, organizing embryonic congregations in both towns. In the following year Mr. George Field, a layman, urged the citizens of Apalachicola "of the propriety of having the service of the Episcopal Church statedly performed."²⁷ Every Sunday between late 1836 and late 1837, Field read the offices of Morning and Evening Prayer from the Episcopal, *Book of Common Prayer*. Based on the popularity of these services the assembly voted to formally organize and obtain an Episcopal clergyman. On February 11, 1837, the congregation was incorporated as Christ Church, by Act Number 58, 15th Session of the Florida Territorial Legislative Council. The first vestrymen included prominent professional and businessmen of the community: Colin Mitchell, Dr. John Gorrie, Elizur Wood, George Middlebrooks, Hiram Nourse, William G. Porter, Cosam E. Bartlett, Ludlum S. Chittenden, and George Field. The first vicar of the mission congregation was the Rev. Charles Jones of New York.

At the organizing convention of the Episcopal Church in the Diocese of Florida, held on January 17, 1838, at St. John's Church in Tallahassee, seven congregations were represented: Tallahassee, Jacksonville, St. Augustine, Key West, Pensacola, St. Joseph, and Apalachicola. Apalachicola was represented by George Field. On a motion by Field, it was "resolved that the minutes of this convention be so amended as that the church at Apalachicola shall be Trinity, and not Christ, as it has been hitherto called"²⁸. Several of the Church's vestrymen were also Directors of the Apalachicola Land Company, the organization authorized by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1835 to carry out the obligations of the Forbes Purchase. The Company donated two city lots to Trinity congregation for the purpose of building a church. With the property secured, George Field organized a campaign to raise funds for the construction of a building. An initial amount of \$7,500 was collected from subscriptions, and an additional \$11,575 was raised from the sale of pews. The church's floor plan **[Slide 3]** would consist of two side aisles with no central aisle, after the manner of a New England meeting house. The church was also furnished with a raised, box pulpit, which the preacher mounted by ascending a set of stairs through a door from the vestry room. Pews near the front were

considered more valuable and sold for \$300-\$425. The prized seats were those facing inward at the front of either side aisle, selling to C.S Tomlinson for \$750 and Joseph Foster for \$575. Pews toward the rear and middle of the church sold for \$125-\$250. The rearmost pews were left unsold and may have been reserved for sojourners or the poor. A copy of the original pew plan dated April 1, 1839 hangs today in the narthex of the church. The practice of selling and renting pews was controversial and the subject of much debate, with opponents likening the church "to a den of thieves." Numerous stories circulated about young men being asked to vacate a pew by the sexton, or the pew's owner, and consequently going over to the Methodists. Pew rental at Trinity Church ceased by mid-century.

Despite an abundance of native timber in the region, Apalachicola in 1837 lacked the skilled labor and tools necessary for building large, fashionable, frame structures. The Episcopalians, as well as several prominent individuals, therefore chose to have their church building and homes constructed in the North and shipped to Apalachicola. The handsome, Greek-revival church was built cut-to-measure of white pine in White Plains, New York, disassembled, shipped in sections by schooner, and reassembled in Apalachicola with mortise-and-tenon joints secured by wooden pins and hausers. The earliest known exterior photograph of Trinity Church **[Slide 4]**, shows a portico with large Ionic columns, a square, flat-roofed, louvered belfry, and large rectangular, triple-hung windows giving the building an air of colonial sophistication, which impresses visitors to this day. An interior photograph, dated 1892, **[Slide 5]** shows wall surfaces and a ceiling of stenciled wainscot. The wall behind the semi-circular chancel rail is decorated with fleur-de-lis in the shape of a cross, symbols of the Holy Trinity, and the inscription "The Lord is in His Holy Temple." The stenciling motifs continued across the ceiling and are still clearly visible. The photograph shows the original pew configuration with their attached doors. It also shows the Henry Erben organ case situated to the right of the chancel rail. A gallery supported by four Ionic columns extends across the back of the nave. Access to the gallery is gained through exterior doors on either side of the main church entrance.

The building project required two years to complete. In 1839 George Field reported to the Diocesan Convention that the "Episcopal Church edifice in Apalachicola...is to be complete by March First next, [and] is in a very considerable state of forwardness.²⁹" The Diocesan Convention met at Trinity in 1840. The Rev. A. Bloomer Hart was appointed rector and the following year the church was consecrated by the Rt. Rev. James H. Otey, Bishop of Tennessee.

How then did this small, Florida, frontier town come to possess a pipe organ by one of the most illustrious organ builders of Atlantic seaboard? There is very little documentary evidence with which to trace Henry Erben's activity in Florida, thus leaving the details surrounding the purchase of the Apalachicola instruments open to conjecture. St. John's Church in Tallahassee however, presumably had its Erben organ in place when the conventions of the Diocese of Florida met there in 1838 and 1839. It is very likely that George Field and possibly other Apalachicolans heard the Tallahassee Erben played on these occasions.

I have already stated that many of Trinity's charter members, and early clergymen, were originally from mid-Atlantic, states, and may have already been familiar with Henry Erben's reputation as an organ builder. It was not uncommon during the hot, "fever months", for residents to travel north to escape the inhospitable climate, to conduct business, to visit family and friends, and acquire luxury items not available on the frontier. A member or members of the Apalachicola congregation may have used such an opportunity to hear, inspect, and order an organ on behalf of the new church.

Two further pieces of evidence help establish the early presence of an organ in Apalachicola. An article appearing in a national religious news periodical, *The Churchman*, stated that an organ was in place at the time of the consecration of Trinity Church, on "Sexagesima Sunday" 1840. Quoting from this article,

Until this winter [1840-1] Apalachicola destitute of a clergyman, remained unconsecrated. It is now separated from all

'unhallowed, worldly and common uses' and its tolling bell, organ, and choir make blessed music for its citizens.³⁰

The following Christmas, Trinity Church advertised a "Christmas Oratorio" by one Baron LeFleur, "a finished performer on the organ and pianoforte, with admission of one dollar for the church."³¹ In the context of nineteenth-century America, the term "oratorio" was often used to denote a sacred concert including a variety of performance media, soloists and/or ensembles. What this original organ was like is unknown. No description of it exists, although it was probably of similar size to the existing organ, and situated, along with the choir, in the rear gallery, in keeping with the musical practice of the day.

In the decade prior to the Civil War, Trinity Church reflected the prosperity of Apalachicola. The salary of Trinity's clergyman, was surpassed only by the salaries of Episcopal clergymen in Tallahassee and Key West. In the annual report for 1859, we find noted among other items, that the sum of \$564 was expended "towards a new organ", with the comment that the new instrument "has a fine tone and gives general satisfaction."³² It is apparent from this report, therefore, that at some point prior to 1859, the Vestry of Trinity Church determined to replace their Erben organ.

The motivation for their decision is unknown, as is the fate of that earlier instrument. In the absence of vestry minutes from this period, definitive answers to these questions are not possible. Faulty workmanship seems improbable. Henry Erben's organs were highly esteemed for the quality of materials and workmanship that went into each instrument regardless of size. (For example, all interior, moveable parts of this organ are fashioned from either black walnut or mahogany.) From 1824, Erben organs carried generous warranties against defects in workmanship. On the other hand, if the organ was ordered prior to the completion of the church structure, it may have subsequently proven inadequate for the musical needs of the congregation. It is well documented that Erben customers frequently exchanged their existing organs for new or larger instruments. A third possible reason for replacing the earlier instrument may have been damage resulting from vandalism or,

most likely, natural disaster. Severe weather was no stranger to the Apalachicola coastline. Trinity Church suffered extensive wind damage in both 1852 and 1853. In his report to the Diocese for 1852, the Rev. W. Trebell Saunders recorded that:

The past season has been one of trial and calamity to the congregation of Trinity Church. On the 23^d of August, the City was visited by a gale of the most terrific violence, which, in its general ravages, crushed in the doors and windows of the church, and greatly damaged the interior. Had the wind continued in full force a short time longer, the building would, in all likelihood, have been prostrated to the ground; as it was, it remained little better than a wreck. The loss was heavy. It is my happiness, however, to report that it has been thoroughly repaired, and much improved in every respect. We thank God for this and that things were no worse. During the season, the attendance has been unusually large, and the services, sustained by an efficient choir, have had, we trust, a salutary effect upon the hearers.³³

The following year Saunders was again grieved to report:

One of the most serious obstacles to the prosperity of this parish consists in the periodical storms, which, although the church was originally well built, always inflict more or less damage upon it. Thereby not only is a severe tax imposed upon the members, but the interruption in the services during repairs, occurring at the most important time of the season, is felt as a sad grievance. Last year, I had to report that this edifice had been nearly destroyed, and repaired at a heavy cost, and now it is my painful duty to record the same calamity. On the 9th of October, a wind swept over the city, blowing with such violence that, had its continuance have been as long as usual, universal ruin must have ensued. Providentially, it ceased in a few hours. With a spirit deserving the highest praise, the members, design restoring all things again. The cholera, which has for some weeks been ravaging the city, has so far, through God's mercy, passed by the people of my charge. May these visitations, the storm and the pestilence, exercise a beneficial influence on the community, arresting the attention of the careless sinner, and causing him "to consider in the day of adversity".³⁴

The organ acquired by Trinity Church in 1859 matches the description of a "stock model", instrument offered in one of Erben's

advertising brochures of the period. **[Slide 6]** This organ (Model No. 3), consisting of eight stops, was available in a case of either "Grecian" or "Gothic" design, in painted oak, black walnut, or mahogany, with gilt front pipes. The brochure claimed that such organs were constantly on hand, in finished or nearly finished condition, and could be had within six weeks of ordering. A contemporary, Erben organ of identical size and description can be found in St. Michael's Roman Catholic Church in Convent, Louisiana. In a letter from Henry Erben to Archbishop Antoine Blanc of New Orleans, dated January 26, 1858, the organ builder states that "I have shipped by the Black Warrior, which sails this day, the organ for St. Michael's, Convent. The steamer will be in New Orleans [by] February 4. One of my workmen, Mr. Mills" [will accompany the instrument]."³⁵ Before the proliferation of railroads in America, coastal or river shipping was the standard mode of commercial transportation.

Unlike many other organs in southern churches which suffered destruction at the hands of Union soldiers, or had their metal pipe work melted down for ammunition by Confederate forces, the organ of Trinity Church survived the Civil War unscathed. Because of its strategic location, the port of Apalachicola was placed under Union naval blockade from June 1861 until the end of the War. Apalachicolans were divided in their loyalties. Many of those with Confederate sympathies fled to other parts of Florida, Georgia, or Alabama. Ardent Union sympathizers retreated to whence they came. Those who remained, regardless of their political loyalties, kept a low profile, eking out an existence from the coastal waters as best they could. When Union soldiers entered Apalachicola in 1862 they were met with no resistance. There was little destruction of personal property and no battles of any significance took place in the vicinity of Apalachicola.

By 1859 the congregation of Trinity church had grown to 94 communicant members. In his parish report for that year, the rector hoped that "some arrangement might soon be made to enlarge the sacred edifice." In 1868, the chancel area of Trinity Church was reconfigured, removing the original, box pulpit. Other cosmetic

repairs and “improvements” to the church structure were also made at this time, to the sum of \$1400. Nineteenth century photographs of the church’s interior show the Erben organ situated to the right of the communion rail, in the northeast corner of the sanctuary **[Slide 7]**. Exactly when the organ and choir were relocated to the nave floor is uncertain, although it may well have coincided with the remodeling of the chancel. The organ remained in this position until 1921, when the chancel and nave were again remodeled to their present configuration.

The economic hard times that followed the Civil War dashed any hopes of further expansion, or the replacement of the little organ with yet a larger or more fashionable instrument. The parochial report of 1869 paints a dismal picture of the town and parish:

It is a day of great adversity with us. The decline of the city, and the removal of a large portion of the population, have weakened the Parish, and rendered the attendance small in comparison with former years. The few who remain are steadfast in the faith, and do what they can to support the Services of the Church.³⁶

Apalachicola had become so depressed by the end of the next decade, that from 1879-1882 Trinity Church had not the means to support a clergyman. Somehow, Trinity Church managed to survive periods “of adversity”, weathering natural and man-made disasters as well. One of the worst tropical storms of record to hit Franklin County, came ashore in 1899, causing extensive property damage and loss of life. The following year, a fire sparked by a wood-burning stove destroyed the nearby Methodist Church along with seventy other buildings in Apalachicola’s business district.

It was not until the third decade of the 20th century, that Apalachicola was experiencing better times, largely through its burgeoning seafood industry. The church’s fortunes again reflected that of the city. In 1921 Trinity’s rector, the Rev. George E. Benedict, generated several strong appeals to remodel the front of the church. As a result, a recessed chancel was added to the existing building, complete with a stepped high altar and reredos, three Tiffany-styled stained glass windows, a new pulpit, and a divided choir. On Easter

Day, March 27, 1921, Mr. and Mrs. John G. Ruge offered to donate a new pipe organ as a memorial to his parents, Mr. and Mrs. Herman Ruge. A seven-stop organ by the Henry Pilcher's Sons Company, was installed the following year. The Erben was partially dismantled and relegated once again to the gallery, where it was allowed to sit mute for 50 years.

In 1974, a fund drive was initiated by the Rev. Sidney Ellis for the restoration of the Erben organ. The National Park Service awarded Trinity Church a grant of \$3,100 for this purpose. A matching grant of \$3,100 was made by the Episcopal Diocese of the Central Gulf Coast. The organ was removed from the church and entrusted to the care of Pennington Pendarvis of Blountstown, Florida. Under Mr. Pendarvis' supervision various repairs were made, and an optional, electric blower was installed. The organ was reinstalled in its present location in 1975 and has been in regular use since.

Throughout most of the history of the pipe organ, from late Middle Ages until the early 20th century, organs have largely been hand-crafted. That Erben executed multiple instruments to a pre-specified design, in no way diminishes their value, historically or musically, since all of Erben's organs were built with the same degree of precision and craftsmanship. Historic organs of this type are often referred to as having "tracker" or mechanical action. This means that the organ pipes are connected to the keys and pedals by a series of mechanical linkages, called trackers, giving the performer an intimate control of the sound production – similar to that of the piano. No electricity is involved in the production of sound, except for the electric blower that now supplies wind to the bellows. Originally, the bellows were operated by hand, with the large wooden handle, still visible, protruding from the right side of the organ case. It was a common responsibility of young boys from the congregation to pump the bellows while the organist played.

So what did an American church organist play during the 19th century? A great many, Anglo-American, Protestant churchmen of the 18th and early 19th centuries were distrustful of organ music in the service of the church, fearing that the sensuality of instrumental

music might distract the mind away from the chief purpose of life on earth – the praise of Jehovah with heart, and mind. In truth of fact, there was very slight difference between contemporary, English keyboard music composed for the church, the theatre and the drawing room. And likewise, most of the immigrant organists who found their way to America during the 18th and early 19th centuries, including the aforementioned Baron Le Fleur, were equally as comfortable in the theatre orchestra pit as in the organ loft. Critics of church music frequently decried the all too common occurrence of operatic airs, programmatic fantasies, and displays of empty virtuosity within the context of divine worship. In the absence of widely available published scores, the ability to improvise at the keyboard remained an integral part of the professional organist's stock-in-trade.

But certainly, not all, church organists during this period were professionals, or possessed the ability to extemporize organ voluntaries at will. Rural organists were often relegated to merely accompanying the singing of metrical psalms and hymns that formed the basis of most American church music.

In 1852, there appeared in Boston, a publication by Artemas Nixon Johnson and Henry Stephen Cutler, entitled

[American Church] Organ Voluntaries, a Complete Collection, adapted to [the] American Church Service, and designed for the use of Inexperienced Organists who have not Progressed far Enough in Their Studies to be able to Play Extemporaneous Voluntaries.

This volume contained 53 short compositions of two kinds – opening and closing voluntaries – the two kinds of pieces an organist would have been expected to play. The opening voluntaries were generally slow and somber. They were harmonically simple in construction and avoided chromatic inflection. The concluding pieces were faster in movement, more chromatic and often included short sections in fugal style. Some of the pieces were attributed to "eminent" masters (including Haydn, Muller, Rinck and Mendelssohn), although most were un-attributed, and therefore, may be assumed to have been composed by either Johnson or Cutler. *American Church Organ*

Voluntaries went through numerous printings, and while we do not know if it was ever actually used at Trinity Church, it may have been. The contents of this collection are well suited to an instrument of limited size and are typical of much, 19th century, American organ music.

We do have a good idea, however, of what music was sung at Trinity Church in its early years. Metrical versions of the Psalms and selected hymn texts were appended to the back of the *Book of Common Prayer*. These formed the basis of congregational singing. We also know that Trinity Church possessed a choir of some ability. On April 27, 1844, the church published the following notice in the *Apalachicola, Commercial Advertiser*

It is possible that some persons have in their possession a few copies of Music Books of Handel and Haydn's edition belonging to the choir of Trinity Church; by returning them, favor will be conferred upon the choir, there being left only one out a dozen copies³⁷.

The volume referred to is the *Boston, Handel and Haydn Society's Collection of Sacred Music*, first published in 1822, in Boston, by Lowell Mason. **[Slide 8]** This important collection by one of 19th America's foremost compilers of sacred music, went through numerous editions, had a wide circulation among progressive, Protestant churches and set new standards for church music. Intended primarily for choirs, the collection contained a large selection of hymns, anthems and chants suitable for the Episcopal Church worship service. Like the Johnson and Cutler collection, many of the texts in this volume were set to music adapted from European composers.

The people of Trinity Church are justifiably proud of their historic organ. It has survived seven score years of use and neglect, natural disaster, political and economic hard times, as well as the Apalachicola climate, an accomplishment of no small magnitude in itself, and serves as a worthy testimony to craftsmanship of Henry Erben. This organ could still benefit from a thorough historic restoration however. The Organ Historical Society provides

guidelines for the restoration of early-American pipe organs and officially recognizes successful restoration efforts. This instrument's unique position in the history of Florida pipe organs warrants every effort at preservation and restoration. It is my hope that like Trinity Church itself, the Henry Erben organ of Apalachicola may sometime receive the historic recognition it so justly deserves, in addition to providing musical enjoyment to listeners for many years to come.

¹ George L. Chapel, "From generation to generation in the church: a history of Trinity Episcopal Church, Apalachicola, Florida," Apalachicola, 1995.

² William Warren Rogers, *Outposts on the Gulf: Saint George Island & Apalachicola from early exploration to World War II* (Pensacola: University of West Florida Press, 1986).

³ William Warren Rogers and Lee Willis III, *At the water's edge: a pictorial and narrative history of Apalachicola and Franklin County* (Virginia Beach: Donning Company, 1997).

⁴ Harry P. Owens, "Apalachicola before 1861" (Ph.d. dissertation, Florida State University, 1966).

⁵ Wiley L. Housewright, *A history of music and dance in Florida, 1565-1865*. (Tuscaloosa & London: University of Alabama Press, 1991).

⁶ John Ogasapian, *Henry Erben: portrait of a nineteenth-century American organ builder* (Braintree, Mass.: Organ Literature Foundation, 1980).

⁷ "Organ building," *City Gazette* [Charleston, South Carolina], 15 June 1824, p.3.

⁸ Stephen L. Pinel, "What Federal and State Censuses Disclose: a Comparator of American Organ Manufacturing," *The Tracker*, 30:4 (1986), p.20-33.

⁹ Frank Morton, "Henry Erben and his work," *The Diapason* 1:2 (January 1910), p.1.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ From an 1858 Baltimore Directory. Quoted by Barbara J. Owen, "Henry Erben's Baltimore Branch," *The Tracker* 1:3 (April 1957), p. 6-7.

¹² "Henry Erben, Organ Builder," *The American Art Journal*, 36:10 (31 December 1881): p.192.

¹³ John R. Swanton, *Early history of the Creek Indians and their neighbors* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1922) pp. 11, 129, quoted in Rogers, *Outposts*, xix.

¹⁴ "Early Apalachicola," *Apalachicola Times*, November 1992, p.5.

¹⁵ Rogers, *At the water's edge*, p.12.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., p.11-19.

¹⁸ The Territory of Florida did not achieve statehood until March 3, 1845.

¹⁹ William D. Price to Andrew Stevenson (Representative from Virginia), October, 1833, in Carter, *Territorial Papers*, XXIV, pp. 902-903, quoted in Owen, p. 82.

²⁰ From *The Sixth Census, 1840*, quoted in Owens, p. 82.

²¹ *Nile's Register*, XXII (June, 1822) p. 224, quoted in Owens, p. 74.

²² Rogers, *At the water's edge*, p. 38.

²³ Dorothy Dodd, "Apalachicola: antebellum cotton port" unpublished manuscript (Florida State Library, 1979), p. 3.

²⁴ Owens, p. 221.

²⁵ From a partial list of goods advertised in the *Apalachicola Gazette*, 1837-1839, quoted in Owens, p. 211.

²⁶ 23d Cong., 2d sess., H. Rept. 19,4 quoted in Rogers, *Outposts*, p.19-20.

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- ²⁷ Jimmie J. Nichols, "Apalachicola Diary", *Apalachicola Times*, 10 September, 1998, p. 2B.
- ²⁸ Joseph D. Cushman, *A goodly heritage: the Episcopal Church in Florida, 1821-1892* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1965), p.3.
- ²⁹ Ibid, p.6.
- ³⁰ "Trinity Church, Apalachicola, Florida", *The Churchman*, 11:1 (13 March 1841), p 3.
- ³¹ Dorothy Dodd, "Apalachicola: antebellum cotton port", p. 9. From the *Apalachicola Gazette* (December, 1840).
- ³² Protestant Episcopal Church in the U.S.A. Diocese of Florida, *Journal of the...convention of the Diocese of Florida* (Tallahassee: Florida Sentinel Office, 1860), p. 24.
- ³³ Protestant Episcopal Church in the U.S.A. Diocese of Florida, *Journal of the...convention of the Diocese of Florida* (Tallahassee: Florida Sentinel Office, 1852,) p.29.
- ³⁴ Protestant Episcopal Church in the U.S.A. Diocese of Florida, *Journal of the ...convention of Diocese of Florida* (Tallahassee: Florida Sentinel Office, 1853) p.29.
- ³⁵ Stephen L. Pinel, "From the OHS American Organ Archives", *The American Organist*, 31:11 (November, 1997), p.70.
- ³⁶ Protestant Episcopal Church in the U.S.A. Diocese of Florida, *Journal of the...convention of the Diocese of Florida* (New York: American Church Press Co., 1869), p.21.
- ³⁷ Housewright, p.131.